

# Connecting Credentials

*BUILDING LEARNING-BASED CREDENTIALING SYSTEMS*

## **Improving Learner Mobility**

**Work Group Report**

**November 2017**

## Forward

Connecting Credentials is a collaborative effort of more than 120 national organizations and more than 3,000 stakeholders to make credentials easier to understand, use and interconnect. Credentials include degrees, certificates, diplomas, professional and industry certifications, licenses, and micro-credentials such as digital badges. Credentials connect people to jobs, education programs and career pathways.

In April 2017, Connecting Credentials convened five workgroups of diverse leaders in credentialing reform to tackle particularly challenging aspects of achieving the vision of a learner-centered credentialing ecosystem articulated in the 2016 [From National Dialogue to Collective Action: Building Learning-Based Credentialing Systems](#). The workgroups were asked to recommend actionable steps that should be taken to address the credentialing needs and priorities of diverse learners, especially adults with no recognized postsecondary education, in the complex and highly dynamic credentialing marketplace. With this equity focus, they addressed the following questions:

- **Building Trust in the Quality of Credentials:** *How can we increase the quality, quantity and pay-off of credentials for all students, especially for those with no other postsecondary credentials?*
- **Equipping Adult Learners to Attain Market-Valued Postsecondary Credentials:** *How do we equip and empower adults with no postsecondary credential to navigate, persist and succeed in selecting and attaining postsecondary credentials that lead to educational and economic advancement?*
- **Aligning Demand and Supply Signals:** *What should be done to better align diverse credentialing processes and products with emerging employer hiring practices so that job applicants are evaluated based on what they know and can do, rather than who they know and where they went to school?*
- **Improving Learner Mobility:** *How can we improve credential stackability and portability, especially for adults with little or no prior postsecondary education?*
- **Making All Learning Count:** *How can we reliably and consistently recognize learning that takes place in informal and workplace settings?*

This report and those of the other four work groups can be found at [www.connectingcredentials.org](http://www.connectingcredentials.org). Each workgroup started with the recognition that the predicted disruptions in our learning and credentialing systems already have begun to transform these systems. More diverse learners with different needs and priorities are engaging in postsecondary learning than ever before. The speed of change in the clusters of competencies required at work is accelerating. The proliferation of learning and credentialing options, including substantial expansion of work-based learning, continues unabated, leaving credential seekers confused about what credential and pathway to pursue and credential providers and their quality assurers trying to adjust to this changed environment.

Together, the workgroups contributed to our understanding of the interconnectedness and systemic nature of these challenges, identified leading-edge policies and practices to address these challenges and provided useful guidance for moving forward on multiple fronts.

## Introduction

The Improving Learner Mobility Workgroup focused on what should be done to change the culture in postsecondary education regarding the value of short-term credentials so that rather than being viewed as one-off interventions, they are considered important learning milestones and fully integrated and aligned with career pathways and stackable credentials<sup>1</sup> that lead to further learning and career progression.

Short-term credentials span competency-based and more traditional educational credentials issued by diverse entities that are subject to different quality standards and quality assurance processes. They include a wide variety of postsecondary educational certificates issued by diverse providers and tied to program of study; industry and professional certifications that are typically awarded through assessment and validation of a person's skills by a business, trade association or other industry group; and new forms of digital badges or micro-credentials that are being used to represent granular competencies as well as deeply linked, rich experiences and complex learning sometimes in conjunction with and/or as modular components of traditional credentials.

While our focus is on actions that can be taken to integrate short-term credentials into credentialing pathways, we emphasize that all of the recommended changes must be made in ways that keep or enhance the value of short-term credentials to employers. A key strength of short-term credentials is that they can provide a solid bridge between employer demand for skills and educational offerings that accommodate the needs of diverse learners in a dynamic marketplace. In particular, we focus on what is being done and what more should be done to:

1. Educate employers, students and educators on the importance of short-term credentials in the credentialing marketplace.
2. Increase the value of learning represented by short-term credentials in education to increase learners' access to further learning.
3. Expand use of performance or competency-based approaches in credentialing.
4. Use federal policy to support learner mobility and pathways that extend from the attainment of short-term credentials through associate degrees and beyond.

## Assessment of the current state of policy and practice

We find that a great deal of work is being done at the institutional and community level to create aligned niche programs with stackable credentials. Many of these program innovations are being implemented within the context of career pathways and competency-based education reforms. Some states are using discretionary funding to incentivize the development of more aligned programs while a number of other states are pursuing a more systemic approach to creating “cohesive combination(s) of partnerships, resources and funding, policies, data, and shared performance measures that support the development, quality, scaling, and “dynamic sustainability” of career pathways and programs for youth

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<sup>1</sup> The U.S. Department of Labor defines a stackable credential as “part of a sequence of credentials that can be accumulated over time to build up an individual's qualifications and help them to move along a career pathway or up a career ladder to different and potentially higher-paying jobs. (Source: TEGL 15-10, [www.doleta.gov](http://www.doleta.gov))

and adults.”<sup>2</sup> In addition, the federal government is experimenting with ways to adjust the rules on the use of time-based federal student financial aid to accommodate these innovations.

**Career Pathway Innovations.** With encouragement by foundations, states and the federal government<sup>3</sup>, community colleges, high schools, adult education providers, workforce agencies and community-based organizations are partnering with employers to better align curricula and credentials with changing workforce requirements. The initiatives align a myriad of disconnected services and change practices to help learners attain credentials needed to access good jobs and further learning. The federal government has also promoted the development of career pathways and several federal laws include a definition of career pathways that focuses on key programmatic components.<sup>4</sup> In addition to programmatic efforts, the career pathways construct is being used for systemic alignment of policies and programs. To guide state and local systemic efforts, 10 leading edge states and their local partners (The Alliance for Quality Career Pathways<sup>5</sup>) developed a clear set of criteria and indicators for what constitutes a quality state and local/regional career pathway system, as well as metrics to assess participant progress and success.

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<sup>2</sup> Career Pathway system definition developed by the Alliance for Quality Career Pathways, a partner-driven, CLASP-led initiative funded by the Joyce Foundation, the James Irvine Foundation, and the Greater Twin Cities United Way.

<sup>3</sup> Federal support comes through WIOA, which makes state and local Workforce Development Boards responsible for aligning core partners and developing and improving the workforce system through the creation of career pathways and makes development of career pathways an eligible activity under all parts of the Act. Discretionary funding provided through the \$2 billion Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training (TAACCCT) grant) program supported implementation of career pathways, credit for prior learning, competency-based models, online training, and strong student supports to help adult students obtain industry-recognized credentials more quickly. The U.S. Department of Labor reports that community colleges developed or redesigned nearly 2,600 Programs of Study through the program. In addition, a student without high school diploma is eligible for Title IV financial aid under HEA’s Ability-to-Benefit provision if the student demonstrates his or her ability-to-benefit from postsecondary education and participates in a career pathway program that meets the federal definition.

<sup>4</sup> As defined in the federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) and the Higher Education Act (HEA) a career pathway is “a combination of rigorous and high-quality education, training, and other services that:

(A) aligns with the skill needs of industries in the economy of the State or regional economy involved;  
(B) prepares an individual to be successful in any of a full range of secondary or postsecondary education options, including registered apprenticeships;  
(C) includes counseling to support an individual in achieving the individual's education and career goals;  
(D) includes, as appropriate, education offered concurrently with and in the same context as workforce preparation activities and training for a specific occupation or occupational cluster;

(E) organizes education, training, and other services to meet the particular needs of an individual in a manner that accelerates the educational and career advancement of the individual to the extent practicable;

(F) enables an individual to attain a secondary school diploma or its recognized equivalent, and at least 1 recognized postsecondary credential; and

(G) helps an individual enter or advance within a specific occupation or occupational cluster.

<sup>5</sup> Arkansas, California, Illinois, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Oregon, Virginia, Washington, and Wisconsin — and their local/regional partners participated in the AQCP.,

Innovations being implemented under the umbrella of career pathways include:

- Aligning short-term credit and non-credit bearing postsecondary education programs with portable and stackable credentials;
- Creating effective on-ramps to postsecondary learning through more integrated service delivery (e.g., integrating vocational training and remediation or basic skills instruction), dual enrollment options and articulation agreements with high schools, and adult education and job training providers.
- Incorporating learning and credentials from external providers and workplaces in programs of study, by using credit for prior learning or articulation agreements as approaches and embedding industry and professional certifications in programs of study.
- Unbundling/modularizing existing longer-term programs, including embedding digital badges and micro-credentials in programs of study.

Despite the dual goal of improving access to employment and continued learning, much of the career pathways work to date has focused on helping learners attain the first credential they need for employment. A major challenge remains creating incentives for individuals, institutions and their partners to look beyond this first credential toward educational and career progression. Using available and admittedly limited data, the Community College Research Center [estimates](#) that only about 3-5 percent of college students obtain some form of stackable credential. Many of these are short-term credentials are earned by people who already have degrees to keep their skills up-to-date.

Under the umbrella of “guided pathways,” community colleges are implementing complementary reforms redesigning their academic offerings from a “cafeteria” approach to a more curated or guided set of course sequences leading to degrees; as well as intake, navigational and other student supports and instructional innovations. These reforms lend themselves to embedding or stacking credentials within degree programs.

**Competency-focused Innovations.** Competency-based education (CBE) programs are growing in popularity, especially among working adults, as a flexible and lower-cost way to earn a marketable credential. Although CBE programs vary from institution to institution and program to program, they generally incorporate the following principles: flexible learning at a personalized pace; close faculty oversight of students’ progress; specific, clearly defined learning outcomes that students much reach; practical, relevant and (when possible) workplace-based projects; and assessment of learning that students gained prior to enrollment.<sup>6</sup> Some CBE programs are offered using credit hours or clock hours while others rely solely on direct assessment of student learning. Direct assessment programs currently aren’t eligible for essentially time-based federal financial aid except through waivers.

Leading institutions came together to create the Competency-Based Education Network (C-BEN) in order to accelerate progress on resolving common challenges in implementing CBE and developing new business processes and systems to support scalable CBE programs. The network, which now includes 30 colleges and universities and four public higher education systems, has developed numerous tools to guide competency-based program development, including draft [Quality Principles and Standards for Competency-Based Programs](#).

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<sup>6</sup> Lumina Foundation in *Lumina Foundation Focus*, Summer 2017.

In addition, the Connecting Credentials beta Credentials Framework has been tested in a variety of contexts as a reference tool to make it easier for stakeholders to understand the competencies associated with any credential and to compare the value of various credentials and determine which credential best fits their needs. By providing common language and a unified framework for understanding competencies represented by credentials, it has helped users create clearly visible pathways to increase career and economic mobility for historically underserved and underrepresented populations and to support the translation of learning acquired across institutions and between academic institutions and employers.

**State Policy Leadership.** A growing number of states are using their statutory, regulatory, funding and policy guidance authority as well as convening and capacity building strategies to drive change in the culture surrounding short-term credentials.<sup>7</sup> Their use of different approaches reflects, at least in part, differences in the scope and authority of state higher education entities and the various roles played by state legislatures, governors, state workforce councils, the employer community and others in driving reforms. Various examples of state leadership are provided in the recommendation section that follows to illustrate ways our recommendations can be implemented.

**Federal Financial Aid Experiments.** The federal government is using flexibility under the Experimental Sites Initiative to experiment with ways to broaden eligibility of a number of program innovations endorsed by this work group for Title IV Financial Aid. These include competency-based education, dual enrollment, prior learning assessment. In addition, the Educational Quality through Innovative Partnerships (EQUIP) program is testing the efficacy of including postsecondary institutions and non-accredited providers such as boot camps in helping students achieve educational and employment outcomes in the financial program and assessing new quality-assurance processes that are appropriate for non-traditional providers and the short-term and more flexible programs they offer.

Despite this progress, we contend that much more needs to be done at all levels to change the basic incentives, rules, and resource and capacity constraints that influence how educational institutions, their partners and learners function on a regular basis. These structural barriers include:

- Our postsecondary education financial aid and other policies are time- rather than learning-based and designed around a comprehensive long-term model directed at producing degree holding graduates.
- Short-term programs created with the best of intentions to meet employer and student needs often lead to certificates and other forms of credentials that are of variable marketability and economic return.
- Credentials awarded are often neither portable nor connected or articulated to other programs of study in strong and clear credentialing pathways that lead to further learning and credentials, including degrees for those who choose to pursue that route.
- Federal and state postsecondary program and longitudinal data systems provide insufficient coverage of diverse learners, credentials and credential providers and are difficult to connect to make outcomes and quality transparent to users.

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<sup>7</sup> See National Skills Coalition's [50-state policy scan on stackable credentials](#)

- Without specific articulation agreements, it can be cumbersome and costly to obtain credit in postsecondary education for learning that takes place in workplaces, workforce development programs, high schools and community-based organizations.
- Deliberate/slow quality assurance, curriculum development and other processes make it difficult for programs and credentials to stay relevant to rapidly changing skill requirements.
- Learners’ lack access to easily understandable and useable information and assistance in navigating the increasingly complex credentialing marketplace
- Many faculty and postsecondary leaders don’t value short-term credentials and therefore aren’t supportive of integrating them into their longer-term programs of study.
- Faculty and institutions often lack the capacity to implement what we know about effective service delivery options (CBE, career pathways, contextual ABE, etc.)

## Recommendations

We make the following broad recommendations for integrating short-term credentials into credentialing pathways that support learner mobility:

1. Educate employers, students and educators on the importance of short-term credentials in the credentialing marketplace.
2. Increase the value of learning represented by short-term credentials in education to increase learners’ access to further learning.
3. Expand use of performance or competency-based approaches in credentialing.
4. Use federal policy to support learner mobility and pathways that extend from the attainment of short-term credentials through associate degrees and beyond.

Under each recommendation, we discuss how this can be done recognizing that states, communities, postsecondary institutions and their partners are at different stages of changing the culture around short-term credentials and that they have different tools at their disposal for encouraging and implementing this change. We also provide examples of how a number of states have already addressed some of our recommendations.

### *1. Educate employers, students and educators on the importance of short-term credentials in the credentialing marketplace.*

We start with a recommendation to improve understanding of the content, processes and outcomes of short-term credentials because we believe that building the trust of employers, educators, learners and accreditors in these credentials is a prerequisite for fuller integration of short-term credentials into longer-term credentialing pathways. Taking the following actions will improve the perception of these credentials and the programs that lead to their attainment.

- a. **Improve data collection on the educational and labor market outcomes of short-term credit-bearing and noncredit programs and students in these programs.** Such data is important to determine the value of these credentials for employers, funders and for different kinds of students (e.g., low skill youth and adults with no previous postsecondary credential seeking to enter the labor market, students in programs of study with embedded short-term credentials, working adults in continuing education to upgrade their skills).

- b. **Provide students with easily understandable information on specific credentialing pathways and options for obtaining stackable academic and workforce credentials.** Information on programs of study at institutions should include the cost of different credentialing options, how long it will take to attain the credential, the types of jobs and salaries people who have the credential can expect to get, and the transferability of skills or competencies represented by a credential to other work-related sectors or positions. Information can be provided graphically as in the [career pathway roadmaps](#) developed by Oregon’s community colleges. These roadmaps visually chart the certificates, degrees and skills progression needed to access entry-level positions and continue on through career advancement opportunities. The roadmaps also include occupation and wage information. In addition to developing roadmaps, information on next steps along credentialing pathways also can be embedded in the curriculum.
- c. **Be transparent about factors that contribute to credential quality.** Providing accurate, reliable and accessible information on the quality of diverse short-term credentials will contribute to greater understanding of the value of these credentials and make it easier to compare and align one credential to another. Credential providers should make information available to stakeholders on: the competencies represented by specific short-term credentials; the outcomes achieved by credential holders; the quality assurance and other processes associated with the development and awarding of the credential including, the validity of the assessments undergirding the credential and the process that goes assuring the curriculum’s relevance in the labor market. The American Council on Education’s [Quality Dimensions for Connected Credentials](#), discusses the importance of transparency as one of six key quality dimensions that promote trust in a credential and facilitate it’s connection to other credentials.

**2. *Increase the value of learning represented by short-term credentials in education to increase learners’ access to further learning.***

While short-term occupational credentials have substantial – albeit varied - value in the labor market, educational credit and credit transfer policies often are barriers to the integration of these credentials into credentialing pathways leading to further learning and more advanced credentials. These credentials can provide entry points for students into higher education. In gaining these credentials, some students realize that they have the capacity to continue with more education. This is particularly true when the non-credit credentials are evaluated for credit.

We recommend that the following steps be taken to increase the award of educational credit for the skills and learning represented by short-term credentials, and the transferability of that credit to help learners access further learning.

- a. **Align short-term noncredit education with credit-bearing longer-term programs of study to facilitate learner progression and eliminate dead ends.** In some states such as Kentucky and some community colleges most vocational courses are offered for credit. However, in many states and institutions (e.g., community colleges) noncredit postsecondary vocational programs are offered side-by-side with credit-bearing programs or in separate institutions such as technical institutes or centers. Many programs offered in conjunction with the public workforce development (WIOA) system, apprenticeship programs and/or programs “customized” for specific employers also are provided on a non-credit basis. While these programs may well be



valuable for helping people get or keep a job (e.g., renewing a license, updating a professional certification or otherwise updating their skills), non-credit programs are problematic when they impede students' access to further learning within the education system and career progression.

Ohio has taken a number of steps to align noncredit and credit-bearing programs and credentials. The Ohio Department of Higher Education, which oversees the state's non-credit Technical Centers and Community Colleges, which provide credit and non-credit certificates, facilitated development of a shared definition of "technical certificates" and provided state policy guidance on how to count certificates and certifications for degree paths. It also created statewide articulation agreements between non-credit certificates offered by the state's community colleges and Technical Centers and into degree programs at public colleges and universities. To be eligible for these programs, students must have successfully completed the certificate program AND earned identified certifications. A One-Year Option provides a block of technical credit and Career Tech Credit Transfer (CT2) provides specific course credits. They also provide block credit for certifications either through articulation to course credit or general credit toward degree.

- b. **Improve transferability of credit.** Even when credit is provided, it is often [not transferrable](#) because of siloed programs and governance arrangements, metrics for assessing quality and quality assurance practices and lack of transparency regarding what competencies credentials represent. The credentials awarded are often neither portable or connected/articulated to other programs of study in strong and clear credentialing pathways that lead to further learning and credentials, including degrees for those who choose to pursue that route.

States have improved transferability in a number of ways:

- Georgia's State Board of Technical and Adult Education adopted a statewide policy that technical colleges must offer technical certificates and diplomas that stack to associate degrees in the same occupational area.
- Minnesota requires technical colleges or consolidated technical community college to offer students the option of pursuing diplomas or certificates in each technical education program, unless the Board of Trustees of the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities determines that a degree is the only acceptable credential for career entry in a specific field. All vocational and technical credits earned for a diploma or certificate are applicable toward any available degree in the same program.
- Ohio Department of Higher Education's program approval process requires institutions to show how all credit-bearing certificates connect to a degree program.

- c. **Integrate Credit for Prior Learning (CPL) processes into standard academic practice.** Credit for prior learning operates on the periphery of education practice. Institutions and states can help give CPL a more central role within institutions by streamlining the process and increasing its value to institutions and faculty. States can promote consistent standards for awarding credit through CPL and facilitate the development of standards of best CPL practice and promote their adoption through technical assistance activities. They can incentivize colleges to do more CPL through funding that supports faculty training and processes, possibly through a special FTE that brings additional money to the college. Institutions can include faculty involvement in CPL in faculty evaluation, tenure, promotion and salary decisions. Federal, state and institutional funding policy can provide incentives for individuals to pursue CPL by reducing the cost to individuals, who now bear most of the cost.

At the State University of New York's Empire State College, every student within every program has the option to pursue CPL. These credits can be used to meet any of the degree requirements. Faculty advise students on CPL as part of the normal degree process. As a result, 50% of the students graduate with some CPL credits and over 4000 students work on individualized CPL portfolios per year. CPL is considered an important part of the educational model, which adds to the persistence and completion rates of the college.

- d. **Integrate industry-recognized certifications into community college and workforce development program offerings.** Embedding industry and professional certifications in educational programs of study allows students to simultaneously obtain one or more these marketable employer-recognized credentials and educational credentials such as degrees, diplomas, and certificates. Certifications are awarded to individuals by certifying bodies based on the individual's demonstration (usually by passing a test) of specific occupation, industry, or technology-related skills and knowledge. Certifications can be integrated in credit-bearing programs of study either by awarding credit for the attainment of these credentials using CPL or by embedding the learning outcomes from industry certifications (and possibly attainment of the certifications themselves) into credit-bearing programs of study. A [study](#) conducted by Lumina Foundation and Connecting Credentials found that the practice is especially prevalent in credit-bearing certificate and associate and applied associate degree programs in community and technical colleges; and in credit-bearing and non-credit certificate programs in four-year institutions.

The Florida Career and Professional Education Act (CAPE), allocates incentive funds tied to students' attainment of industry certifications. Colleges receive \$1,000 for each industry certification earned by a student, up to a maximum allocation of \$5 million. Statewide articulation agreements make it possible for students to receive college credit for successfully earning a nationally recognized industry certification.

- e. **Modularize existing programs and offer shorter stackable credentials so that learners are recognized for what they've accomplished rather punished for not finishing.** Modules need to represent knowledge and skills in demand in the labor market and be made up of bundles of knowledge and skills that makes sense for instructional purposes.

To encourage modularization, Oregon and Wisconsin streamlined their state approval processes for short-term credit-bearing credentials that are wholly embedded in already-approved, longer-term Associate Degree programs. Kentucky used its ability to provide fractional credit to modularize classroom-based and on-line occupational programs that are in demand in the labor market.<sup>1</sup> Canada created 3-year degrees, which combine liberal arts and occupational skills programming, to provide a way to recognize the learning attained by many students, who now leave postsecondary education without a credential after three years.

### ***3. Expand use of performance or competency-based approaches in credentialing.***

Competency-based approaches have the potential to improve the educational experience and completion rates for many students, especially working adults; but the design of our current funding, program approval, credit, transfer and other policies and practices make it difficult to accommodate, much less encourage these innovations. We recommend that the following actions be taken:

- a. **Allow greater flexibility and more experimentation in using competency based approaches.** This can be done by, for example: redefining credit by level of engagement and learning rather than duration of engagement; facilitating transfer based on student learning rather than accumulation of credits; and adjusting the metrics and myriad rules related to institutional and student-based funding. Develop rigorous performance assessments and work and learn models, through which learners can demonstrate competence.
- b. **Focus on continuous quality improvement by adopting shared quality standards and evaluating what works.** All of the field-based experimentation with competency-based approaches to instruction and credentialing provides an opportunity to learn about the effectiveness of different approaches with different students in different contexts. The aforementioned CBEN Quality Principles and Standards for Competency-Based Programs are a starting point for defining quality and continuous improvement efforts in CBE. Current experiments under the U.S. Department of Education's Experimental Sites authority are testing new approaches for assuring the quality of CBE programs to make them eligible for Title IV student financial aid.
- c. **Develop performance- or competency-based digital badges with industry partners as a complement to degrees and certificates.** Digital badges are a dynamic new way to formally recognize and validate learners' competencies. Digital badges provide a richer level of detail and a way to verify what learners know and are able to do than degrees and certificates. They also are "discoverable" by employers and others in a variety of on-line contexts. The [Open](#)

[Badges standard](#), originally developed by Mozilla and now overseen by IMS Global, sets the technical standard for assuring the interoperability of digital badges. The standard designed to ensure that a learner receiving a badge can share it with employers from any compliant platform and that users can access evidence of the mastery of competencies backed by verified metadata by trusted issuers.

The Colorado Community College System (CCCS) offers Digital Badges as a dynamic new way to display industry-recognized, employment focused credentials that validate core employability and technical competencies, knowledge and skills for all Industries. CCCS' digital badges with well-defined criteria are an "web-based, verifiable representation of a skill, mastery of a set of skills and/or recognition of expertise" which have been earned and documented with metadata using the IMS Open Badge Standard. *Expert Badges* are issued as students gain specified competencies. They can be earned individually, or grouped together as building blocks to earn a Mastery badge. The Mastery badge is earned when the entire criteria curriculum in the pathway has been completed, assessed and evidence of competency is produced.

#### ***4. Use federal policy to support learner mobility and pathways that extend from the attainment of short-term credentials through associate degrees and beyond.***

Federal higher education policy was designed largely for traditional students who entered postsecondary education immediately following secondary school and were enrolled full-time until they completed a degree (if they didn't drop-out). This is no longer the profile of most postsecondary students. To accommodate the needs of students who enter postsecondary education, attain short-term credentials, often attending part-time, stop-out, and later re-enter to attain longer-term credentials, substantial changes are needed in federal higher education policy.

We recommend that the following specific actions be taken:

- a. Extend eligibility for Higher Education Act Title IV financial aid to students in short-term training programs that: Are at least 150 clock hours over at least 8 weeks; provide training aligned with the requirements of employers in the state or local area; and provides a student, upon completion of the program, with a recognized postsecondary credential. The Higher Education Act (HEA) governs most student aid programs implemented at the federal level. Ninety-five percent of HEA funding flows to Title IV loans and grants, such as Pell Grants, which provide tuition assistance to people enrolled in college or other approved courses of study after high school. Most federal tuition assistance is currently oriented toward "traditional" college students, despite the fact that nearly three-quarters of all undergraduates — such as part-time students, students enrolled in non-credit vocational education at local community colleges, and other working adults — are "non-traditional" students, often creating a mismatch between need and availability of tuition assistance.

- b. Extend eligibility for Higher Education Act Title IV financial aid to cover the cost of Prior Learning Assessments (PLA). The cost of prior learning assessments is currently not an eligible cost of attendance covered by Title IV. Making PLA an eligible cost of attendance would expand federal financial aid to students taking advantage of this valuable tool for learner mobility.
- c. Provide first-time funding to implement Section 492 of the Higher Education Opportunity Act that requires the Secretary of Education to establish a program to encourage articulation agreements between and among institutions in a state. Section 492 states, in part: The Secretary [of Education] shall carry out a program for States, in cooperation with public institutions of higher education, to develop, enhance, and implement comprehensive articulation agreements between or among such institutions in a State, and (to the extent practicable) across State lines... The Secretary shall provide technical assistance to States and public institutions of higher education for the purposes of developing and implementing articulation agreements in accordance with this subsection.
- d. Provide funding under HEA to encourage implementation of innovations that increase credential activities related to developing comprehensive career pathways that meet the federal career pathway definition; modifying time-based policies to enable development and funding of competency-based approaches; institutionalizing Credit for Prior Learning processes; increasing articulation and portability of educational and workforce credentials; and strengthening career and academic guidance and counseling functions.

## Conclusion

Integrating diverse short-term credentials into our postsecondary education system is a matter of economic and moral imperative. Short-term credentials address specific employer needs in a rapidly changing economy and they provide affordable stepping stones along career paths for many learners. We've made numerous recommendations for how to break down the silos between workforce and academic credentials and we've provided examples of how different states and state postsecondary systems in different ways have led the way in overcoming systemic impediments to learners' ability to move ahead. Regardless of where you are in the system, we urge you to take the next step.

## APPENDIX A

### Workgroup Participants\*

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*\* Participation in workgroup deliberations doesn't imply that the individuals listed or their organizations necessarily endorse any or all of the workgroup recommendations.*